DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 719 CS 009 897

AUTHOR McEady-Gillead, Betty
TITLE The Leisure Time of Interested and Uninterested Readers.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (34th, New Orleans, LA, April 30-May 4, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Grade 6; Intermediate Grades; *Leisure Time; Library Surveys; Middle Schools; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Habits; Reading Interests; Reading Research; Recreational Activities; *Recreational Reading
IDENTIFIERS California (North); Reading Motivation

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to draw attention to how sixth graders use their leisure time and to suggest some implications for reading and literacy instruction. Subjects were 723 sixth-grade students in six middle schools in Northern California. The sixth-graders completed the California Media and Library Educators Association Literature/Reading Survey for Library/Media Specialists and Teachers, an 82-item multiple choice survey. Results showed that although most subjects expressed an interest in reading, few of the interested readers spent their leisure time reading, regardless of the community and racial factors. The out-of-school activity ranked highest according to the survey is "watch TV" (10.14 frequency) while reading ranked fifth, with a frequency of 6.85. If educators want young adolescents to increase their leisure reading, then they must provide more opportunities for adolescents to participate in out-of-school activities that play a role in literacy development and advancement. Future research should assess the degree of media distraction, suggest ways to use media and nonprint material to influence literacy behavior, and suggest ways to make textbooks more interesting. (Two figures are included, and 18 references are attached.) (MG)

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THE LEISURE TIME OF INTERESTED AND UNINTERESTED READERS

BETTY McEADY-GILLEAD

Abstract

Few studies have provided data on how middle school students use their leisure time or what activities represent their out-of-school activities and how reading ranks among these out-of-school activities. The purpose of this article is to discuss how sixth graders in middle school use leisure time and to suggest some implications for instructional approaches in reading and literacy instruction. Emphasis is placed on the results excerpted from a larger survey of 723 sixth graders in Northern California. Students responded to questions in the California Media and Library Educators Association Literature/Reading Survey for Library/Media Specialists and Teachers. Requiring less than a 40-minute administration period, this survey with eighty-two multiple choice items yields four kinds of valuable information: (1) the degree of interest in reading, (2) the kinds of books read, (3) the use of free time, and (4) knowledge of literature. Data from section three, "use of free time," are emphasized here. Results show that most subjects report or say that they are interested in reading, but few of the "interested" readers spend their leisure time reading, regardless of community and racial factors. The out-of-school activity ranking highest according to this survey is "Watch TV" (10.14 frequency) while reading ranks fifth, with a frequency of 6.85. Given these data, suggestions are made for future research in media influences on adolescent literacy behavior.

"All intellectual improvement arises from leisure."
(On Goldsmith's apology in the London Chronicle
for beating Evans the bookseller.)

Educators agree that lifelong leisure reading is an important goal of reading instruction. Yet, it appears that a substantial number of adolescents do not choose to read either for pleasure or for information (Greaney, 1980; Book Industry Study Group, 1983). To counter this growing aliteracy among young adults, educators first should investigate how young adolescents use leisure time and to what extent reading plays a role in their use of leisure time.

CS009697

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> "We must beat the iron while it is hot, but we may polish it at leisure." (John Dryden, Aeneis, Dedication)

Research shows that children, grades second to fifth, usually are enthusiastic about reading and tend to do leisure reading as a result of deliberate teacher behaviors and interventions which develop and encourage voluntary or leisure reading (Anderson, 1985; Morrow, 1983). However, by junior and/or senior high school, these once-enthusiastic readers no longer enjoy reading -- despite teachers' efforts to encourage in-class and out-of-class reading. Thus, the prevailing question regarding young adolescent leisure reading is:

> After we successfully motivate students to read in school, how do we get them to polish their reading skills outside the classroom? Or, how do we sustain student motivation beyond the classroom to read for pleasure -- to read in leisure -- given societal influences such as various electronic media (tv, movies, video games, radio)?

In the 1970s and early 1980s the research in effective schools established that reading achievement depends upon how children spend their time in school. Thus, such measurable constructs permeated the literature on effective instructional processes: "time-on-task," "engaged time," "active learning time," and "actual instructional time." Much less is known, however, about the influence of how children spend their time out-of-school -- the hours they spend away from the classroom -- and the impact of those activities on their literacy behaviors.

Leisure: What is it?

Studies of leisure time use often focus on adults. Barbara Heyns (1978) reports that when leisure time use is studied, "the units of analysis have been individuals, or occasionally households; if children's activities are mentioned at all, it is in the context of family activities. This seems largely to be the result of the pragmatic and applied concerns of the field, which tend not to see children as a special group." (p. 190)

John Neulinger's definition (1981), although it says nothing about the cognitive and affective results of leisure, is most encompassing and thereby applicable across all age groups -- including young adolescents or the middle level adolescent which is central to this study:

> To leisure means to be engaged in activity performed for its own sake, freely and without pressure or coercion; it means doing something from which one derives meaning and satisfaction and which involves one to the very core of one's being. To leisure means to be one's self, to express one's talents, one's capacities, and one's potentials." (p. xii)

The use of leisure time has become a topic of increasing interest to social scientists, policymakers, and certain educators -- particularly literacy educators who want to explore the growing <u>alliteracy</u> among our youth. Of course, in American society leisure takes secondary status to <u>work</u>, but use of leisure time is gaining considerable significance as we become more and more concerned about our young people's choice of activities out of school and the impact of those activities on their literacy behaviors.

What are Leisure/Out-of-School Activities of Adolescents?

Medrich, Rolzen, Rubin, and Buckley (1982) identified five domains of out-of-school activities. From the responses of sixth graders who described their activities and interests outside school, these researchers developed generic descriptions of types of out-of-school activities that are meaningful to middle school students cross-culturally. The results yielded five categories (p. 11):

(1) activities "on their own" (alone or with friends) without significant adult supervision or involvement

(2) activities with their parents

(3) in-home and out-of-home chores, jobs, and responsibilities

(4) organized activities, including participation in recreational and cultural programs supervised by adults (other than the adolescents' parents)

(5) television viewing.

Although there is overlap among these categories, each represents different dimensions of an adolescent's daily life, particularly during weekday afternoons and evenings.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to how young adolescents use leisure time and to suggest some implications for instructional activities in reading and literacy instruction. More specifically, this article discusses the following:

(1) the degree to which middle level adolescents spend their time in certain leisure/out-of-school activities;
(2) findings revealed by this survey study and other pertinent research reports about adolescent use of free time and reading; and
(3) description of future research in the influences of media and the role of print material on young adolescents' literacy behavior.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 723 sixth-grade students in six middle schools in Northern California. Schools in diverse socioeconomic communities were chosen in order to obtain comparisons across socioeconomic levels, ability levels, ethnicity, and urban, suburban and semi-rural school settings. All sixth-graders in each of the classrooms selected for this study completed the survey. The initial sampling was larger than 723 but some of the students were ESL, Level 0, and thus could not read the test items or understand the concepts when read to them by the teacher.

The Survey and Administration

The sixth graders were asked to complete the California Media and Library Educators Association Literature/Reading Surveys for Library/Media Specialists and Teachers. It comprises four-categories of questions each with multiple-choice items to which the students responded by marking **A**, **B**, **C**, or **D** on a SCANTRON form to

indicate "Almost Every Day," "Once or Twice a Week," "Once of Twice a Month," or "Never," respectively. (Refer to Figure 1)

Cooperating teachers in each school setting administered the survey to their respective students in one class period. It was not necessary to conduct the survey beyond one classroom period. Requiring less than a 40-minute administration period, the survey yielded four kinds of valuable information for the Reading and English/Language Arts teacher:

(1) the degree of interest in reading

(2) the kinds of books read

(3) the use of free/leisure time, and

(4) knowledge of literature.

The survey is available in three forms: upper elementary, junior high (the form used in this study) and high school. For the purpose of this article category three above is discussed in details.

Analysis, Interpretation and Discussion of Data

Results of the survey in categories one, two, and four are reported in details in another research report (Duggins,1989). The results in category three, use of leisure time, are emphasized in this report. On the other hand, data results in category one were important to this analysis because they indicated who the "interested" and "uninterested" readers were in sixth grade. However, analyses revealed that despite the diverse reading abilities among the subjects, all reported or said that they were interested in reading. Thus, the implication is that reading ability is not a predictor of attitude toward reading.

How these "interested" adolescents spend their leisure time and how much of their leisure time is spent reading became even more mysterious to the researcher. With specific reference to adolescent use of leisure time, the survey revealed that sixth graders are equally apt to spend their leisure time in similar ways regardless of community or ethnic factors.

The social science research in this area -- leisure time use of adolescents -- confirm these findings. For example, Barbara Heyns (1978) in her study of "Summer learning and the effects of schooling," makes the following conclusions regarding the effects of out-of-school activities on school achievement and reading growth of adolescents cross-culturally:

(1) There seem to be differences among families (cross-culturally) that influence the achievement of adolescents but these differences are not perfectly measured by socioeconomic status alone (p. 195).

More than family status variables alone, factors that are more important determinants of achievement and literacy development include:

(a) attitudes toward education

(b) quality of parent-child interactions

(c) home environment

(d) willingness of the family to invest in the children's "play" or leisure activities, and

(e) families' socialization practices, values, and attitudes.

These factors cannot be perfectly correlated with socioeconomic status.

(2) Secondly, where Barbara Heyns found that structured or organized out-of-school activities tended to promote the achievement of the most economically advantaged children to a greater extent than the achievement of low-income children, she attributes the failure not to socioeconomic status but to the fact that children who dislike school do not respond well to any structured programs.

Whereas the present survey study revealed that 12-year-olds across socioeconomic levels are apt to spend their leisure similarly, at closer scrutiny, one would find a significant difference by economic class in the frequency with which adolescents participate in certain out-of-school activities. For, the reality remains that adolescents of lower socioeconomic status are limited by:

*location of leisure activities or programs

*the degree of opportunities for participation in certain leisure or out-of-school programs

*the logistics of attending, and

*the cost of attending.

For example, the distance to a library is more predictive of use among poor adolescents; the relative cost of programs is a substantially more important factor among poor adolescents than among relatively advantaged adolescents (Heyns, 1978).

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of respondents selecting or indicating the leisure activities that they perform with a certain degree of frequency: "In your free time how often do you do the following?"

Figure 1

Percentages of Students Giving Responses

N = 723

IN YOUR FREE TIME HOW OFTEN DO YOU DO THE FOLLOWING?

	Almost Every Day	Once or Twice a Week	Once or Twice a Month	Never
Read	.43	.39	.13	.04
Watch Video Movies	.33	.37	.22	.05
Play Video Games	.34	.28	.20	.17
Work or Play on Computer	.31	.26	.18	.24
Watch TV	.79	.16	.02	.03
Do Arts or Crafts (drawing, coloring, painting, pasting,etc.) at Home	.33	.34	.20	.11
Go to a Movie	.12	.25	.46	.16
Work a Puzzle (crossword, Jigsaw)	.15	.25	.37	.26
Play Cards or Other Games	.26	.40	.23	.11
Work on a Hobby (models, collections, pets)	.27	.32	.21	.19
Go to the School Library	.15	.34	.33	.17
Play a Sport	.54	.27	.11	.08
Homework	.67	.12	.03	.05
Go to Church, Scouts, 4-H, etc.	.11	.32	.14	.42
Go to the Public Library	.11	.35	.36	.15
Play with my Friends	.69	.24	.04	.02

The top five activities indicated by most students in rank order are:

(1) Watch TV----------.79 or 80%

(2) Play with Friends----------.69 or 70%

(3) Homework----------.67 or 70%

This survey study says little about the type of homework students do (for example, how much and what type of reading is involved).

(4) Play....Sport----------.54 or 50%

(5) Read----------.43 or 40%

Not even half of the subjects (723) indicated that they choose reading as a leisure time activity.

Figure 2

Activities Ranked by Indicated Frequency

N = 723

Watch TV----------10.14

Play with my Friends----------9.28

Homework----------8.55

Play a Sport----------7.67

Read----------6.85

Watch Video Movies----------5.66

Do Arts or Crafts (drawing, coloring, painting, pasting, etc.) at Home----------5.52

Play Video Games----------5.40

Work or Play on a Computer----------4.94

Work on a Hobby (models, collections, pets)----------4.73

Go to a Movie----------4.64

Go to the School Library----------3.49

Work a Puzzle (crossword, jigsaw)----------3.17

Go to the Public Library----------3.08

Go to Church, Scouts, 4-H, etc.----------2.74

While Figure 1 shows the percentage of students selecting a certain activity, Figure 2 shows the students' preference for certain activities. That is, in Figure 2 the activities are ranked by score and listed in the order of preference as indicated by the subjects. It is no surprise to find watching TV the most preferred activity, with a frequency score of 10.14.

Although homework ranks third and pleasure reading fifth, it can be seen that there are few literacy-related choice activities. The students indicated that they do not visit either their school or public libraries often, nor do they participate in organizations such as scouts and 4-H, where literacy activities may be infused in the overall curriculum or program.

What Does This Tell Us About Out-of-School Activities?

If we want students to do leisure reading, if we want them to polish their reading skills at leisure, then we need to provide more opportunities for our young adolescents to participate in out-of-school activities that play a role in their literacy development.

Davidson and Koppenhaver (1988) remind us that "programs that both enrich and instruct, such as those that combine literacy with exploration into other areas of young adolescents' interest -- nature, drama, sports, career possibilities -- offer the best chances for success with this age group." (p. 205)

Important data also displayed in Figure 1 are the next set of activities most frequently chosen:

(6) Watch Video Movies----------.33 or 33%

(7) Play Video Games----------.34 or 34%

(8) Do Arts and Crafts----------.33 or 33%

This study also reminds us that we cannot ignore considerations of adolescents' out-of-school activities as possible enhancements or detractors of reading and other school performances. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) have examined the "relationship between time spent in activities and several measures of reading proficiency" and have explored "whether out-of-school activities are in the causal nexus that produces reading growth." (p. 286) They conclude that:
(1) "the amount of time a child spends reading books is related to the child's reading level in fifth grade and growth in reading proficiency from the second to the fifth grade; and (2) that reading books is a cause, not merely a reflection, of reading proficiency." (p. 302)

Questions Regarding Accuracy of Survey

The survey used for this study asked students, "In your free time, how often do you do the following?..., and they had four choices of frequencies to indicate roughly how often they did the listed activities. This may not be as accurate a measure of activity level as an interview or response instrument in which students could indicate how much time they spend at various activities.

For example, a student who played an organized team sport and spent a great deal of free time at practices and games rather than at other

activities listed here would have gotten a relatively low activity score based on the survey and scoring method used in this study; certainly such a student would not be considered "inactive" or "lying about" using other measures of activity.

Conversely, one could respond "Almost Every Day" to many activities even though actual time spent engaged in the activity is relatively small. For example, a student who spends a couple of minutes reading the comics in the daily newspaper might, truthfully, indicate reading almost every day in responding to this survey. Or, frequency of tv viewing is probably not an indicator of how much actual time is involved. Because this survey calls for vague responses ("Almost Everyday," etc.), the researcher resolved that a more definitive view of adolescents' use of leisure time might be gleaned from one-to-one interviews. Plans for this approach are now being developed to include both a quantitative and qualitative exploration of the cultural patterns middle school students use to organize their behavior, to arrange their time and space and to make sense out of school experience. Following is a description of future research which will include an investigation of the role of electronic and mass media versus the role of print material in literacy behavior.

Description of Future Research

Electronic and Mass Media vs Print Material

Today's middle school students are subject to a variety of electronic media influences. (In addition to TV and music media are computer and video games.) The mystique or enchantment that seems to predominate youth interest in electronic media is seldomly transferred to or equal to their interest in school-based print material. In fact, electronic media influences seem to predominate when it comes to a choice of media activities and book reading (Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1984, p. 150). Thus, the efforts of teachers who attempt to muster a similar vitality for school textbook reading is thwarted by media influences.

Functions of Media in the Lives of Adolescents

Although there has been much debate about the alleged influences of TV viewing on reading and school achievement (Hornik, 1981; Telfer & Kann, 1984), this researcher is more interested in the competition of all nonprint media for the time and attention of young people. Moreover, Figure 1 further shows that video games, movies, and computers seem as important to sixth graders as TV viewing.

In a future study of media influence and use, this researcher expects direct interviews of young adolescents to reveal the uses and gratifications students derive from media, for example, information and interpretation; tools for daily living; respite; social prestige; and social contact (McLeod & Okeefe, 1972).

Mass media has many functions in American culture. Students might, for example, use media in a search for information (intrapersonal) or as a vehicle to maintain their role as opinion leaders and information givers (interpersonal). Certain types of media, such as popular music recordings, serve to reinforce adolescent group status or membership (Brake, 1985).

Television has been said to provide escape from social aggression (Johnstone, 1974), and researchers -- acknowledging the reality of TV in young adolescents' lives -- have begun to examine the facilitative, inhibitive, and neutral effects of TV viewing on reading skills and achievement (Beentjes & Van der Voort, 1988) of children and adolescents. Johnstone (1974) further concluded in his study that movie going provides an opportunity for teens to be together without parents. These differing patterns suggest that media consumption is structured by the social setting in which it is situated and thus must be analyzed from that perspective.

Two simple overriding factors that educators tend to ignore about the characteristics of media are:

(1) its interestingness or interestability (a factor in the Irwin and Davis (1980) checklist for text evaluation, recommended by the International Reading Association over and above the traditional readability graph), and

(2) its ability to affect the interest of students across cultures, socio-economic class, religion, grade level, etc.

For some students electronic media serves as a means of escape, perhaps from overwhelming adolescent problems but also from school formalities, including required book reading. For some students the repulsion of school textbooks seems equal to the enchantment of electronic media and TV viewing. How might teachers and textbook authors begin to change this glaring reading-avoidance behavior to reading-approach behavior?

Audience Appropriateness & Textbook Interestability

The researcher expects to answer the above question by investigating the "interestingness" of textbooks in use in sixth, seventh and eighth grade classrooms. The investigation will involve a content analysis of expository (content area texts) and narrative (selective literature) texts to assess the audience appropriateness relative to the interests of the students who are assigned to read them.

Audience appropriateness refers to the extent to which the text matches the reader's schemata -- knowledge of his/her world, knowledge of text structure (syntactic and rhetorical structures). Research confirms the importance of relevant topic prior knowledge to reading comprehension (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, & Goetz, 1977; Anderson, 1985).

Audience interestability refers to the extent to which the text mirrors the social and emotional lives of the students. Other researchers have investigated the role of textbased interest in comprehension and recall of narrative and expository text (Anderson, Shirey, Wilson, & Fielding, 1986; Hidi & Baird, 1988). Anderson, Mason

and Shirey (1984) reported that the interestingness of single sentences had a most powerful effect on how children recalled these materials.

Since interestability varies with texts and audiences, the researcher plans to extend the research on leisure reading among young adolescents in order to give additional empirical evidence of the motivational effects of interest and content in reading. It seems important to identify the kind of information that can create a heightened sense of interest in school texts without interfering with the learning process. In other words, a better understanding of the characteristics of texts that contribute to a reader's difficulties and/or enjoyment is important to understand students' reading-avoidance (or aliteracy) and reading-approach behaviors. This would facilitate the matching of texts to readers with varying skills, knowledge and interests.

Moreover, an understanding of the characteristics of texts that contribute to reader difficulties or enjoyment would show where mismatches of text and students have occurred. Finally, knowing more about texts would also help in identifying specific reading difficulties and suggest instructional interventions and/or strategies for reading which can be implemented in appropriate settings.

In summary, this article draws attention to how young adolescents say they use their leisure time, and it reveals the following:

(1) Adolescents in this study report or say (at least in the classroom setting) that they are interested in reading, but also indicate a greater preference for TV viewing and playing

with their friends than for reading in their free time. The sixth graders in this study are equally apt to spend their leisure time in similar ways regardless of community or ethnic factors.

(2) Reading, in fact, ranks fifth to TV viewing, while "play with friends" ranks second, and doing "homework" ranks third.

(3) Ranking close to reading are watching video movies and playing video games.

(4) If educators want young adolescents to increase their leisure reading, then we must provide more opportunities for young adolescents to participate in out-of-school activities that play a role in literacy development and advancement.

(5) Finally, given the competition of TV viewing, electronic and other nonprint media for the time and attention of youth, further research should assess the degree of media distraction, suggest ways to use media and nonprint material to influence literacy behavior, and suggest ways to enhance the interestingness or interestability of textbooks and other print material.

Thus, the question remains, how might teachers and textbook authors begin to change the glaring reading-avoidance behavior among young adolescents to reading-approach behavior despite the influence of TV and other nonprint media on the leisure time of young adolescents?

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